

The New York Times

June 18, 2013

Humanities Committee Sounds an Alarm

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A new national corps of “master teachers” trained in the humanities and social sciences and increased support for research in “endangered” liberal arts subjects are among the recommendations of a [major report](#) to be delivered on Capitol Hill on Wednesday.

The report comes amid concern about low humanities enrollments and worries that the Obama administration’s emphasis on science education risks diminishing a huge source of the nation’s intellectual strength. Requested by a bipartisan group of legislators and scheduled to be distributed to every member of Congress, it is intended as a rallying cry against the entrenched idea that the humanities and social sciences are luxuries that employment-minded students can ill afford.

People talk about the humanities and social sciences “as if they are a waste of time,” said Richard H. Brodhead, the president of Duke University and a co-chairman of [the commission](#) that produced the report. “But this facile negativism forgets that many of the country’s most successful and creative people had exactly this kind of education.”

Those people, Mr. Brodhead pointed out, include both President Obama (political science major) and Mitt Romney (English), as well as most of the 54 members of the commission, which includes distinguished jurists, business leaders, artists, scholars, university presidents and politicians, many of whom offer stirring testimonials on the value of their own liberal arts training.

The 61-page report, called “The Heart of the Matter,” which was shepherded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and based on meetings held around the country over two years, arrives trailing some of its own controversy, thanks to recent allegations that Leslie C. Berlowitz, the academy’s president, had misrepresented her scholarly credentials. But, more crucially, it lands at a time when the humanities and social sciences are themselves often accused of being frivolous at best, fraudulent at worst.

Last fall a [task force](#) organized by Gov. Rick Scott of Florida caused a national outcry with the recommendation that state universities charge higher tuition to students in fields — like anthropology or English — deemed less likely to lead to jobs. At the same time, Republicans

in Congress have repeatedly tried to eliminate financing for political science research through the National Science Foundation, except for that deemed to be essential for national security.

And a report this month by Harvard University, long a bastion of the liberal arts, drew alarm with statistics showing that only 20 percent of its undergraduates in 2012 were majoring in the humanities, a drop from 36 percent in 1954.

Nationwide, a mere 7.6 percent of bachelor's degrees were granted in the humanities in 2010, a figure several people connected with the report said reflects understandable but exaggerated fears about job prospects.

"We are preparing students to be employable," said Eduardo J. Padrón, a commission member and the president of Miami-Dade College, a mostly two-year institution, whose 175,000 students include many immigrants and low-income students. But without the humanities and social sciences, he added, "they are missing something important."

The commission, whose other co-chairman is John W. Rowe, former chairman of the energy company Exelon, puts strong emphasis on the pragmatic value of the humanities. One chart in the report highlights a survey showing that 51 percent of business leaders regard liberal education as "very important," while 74 percent unequivocally want it for their own children.

The report touches on some contentious issues, starting with its clear endorsement of the Common Core, a national standards initiative that has been embraced by more than 40 states and the District of Columbia and is aligned with the drive toward standardized testing.

Its recommendations for increased attention to teaching at the university level may also raise hackles. Russell Berman, a literary scholar at Stanford University and former president of the Modern Language Association, who is not a member of the commission but has seen the report, pointed out its call for scholars to offer "broad-gauged, integrative courses" rather than just those "narrowly tied" to their own research.

The report "is trying to turn the dial away from the absolute primacy of research toward a healthier balance of research and teaching," he said. "Them's fighting words in parts of higher education."

Pauline Yu, the president of the American Council of Learned Societies and a member of the commission, defended the report's treatment of scholarly research, which it calls the "core" of the humanities and social sciences at all levels.

"The statement is right there: research is the 'bedrock' of everything else," Ms. Yu said.

The report, which encourages support for foreign language learning and international study, also notes [that](#) China, Singapore and some European nations are currently turning to American-style liberal arts education “as a stimulus to innovation and a source of social cohesion.”

Here, it warns, “we are instead narrowing our focus and abandoning our sense of what education has been and should continue to be — our sense of what makes America great.”